THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
A Song of Thanksgiving

November 21, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"One way toward redeeming the familiar in our own too familiar American story of Thanksgiving is to realize that we do not give thanks for the Pilgrims. Rather, we give thanks for that God whom they adored, that God of all ages past and all ages yet to be. Thanksgiving, then begins with God....

God is. We are. In spite of our fumbles and because of God's grace we are not daunted by the troubles of this age, nor are we fearful of what is to come. We do not bless God for our wealth, our health, or for our feeble wisdom. We bless God that God is, that we are, and that his promise and love shall be with us when time itself shall be no more.

Peter J. Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living
"Thanksgiving: Redeeming the Familiar"

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Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

A SONG OF THANKSGIVING

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 21, 1999
Matthew 6:25-34

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." (Matthew 6:25)

Startle us, O God, with your extravagant generosity. Startle us with your good gifts all around us; life and love, faith and friends. Startle us with your truth which makes us free. And speak your word to us this day; give us faith to hear and respond by recommitting our lives to your kingdom, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

A recent *Chicago Tribune* poll of expressway drivers revealed the not-surprising information that approximately one third of us are now talking on the phone while we are driving; 40% of us are drinking coffee, and 25% of those interviewed said they often eat a whole meal while driving. Furthermore, 12% of us will make an angry or obscene gesture in the stress of expressway driving, stress which is obviously increased by our recent insistence on trying to do all of that at once. (*Chicago Tribune,* Business and Technology, 10/11/99)

It even has a name—"multitasking"—doing as many things simultaneously as possible and, perhaps neither paying attention to nor enjoying any of them very much.

All of that is from a new book everybody is talking about, *The Acceleration of Almost Everything* by James Gleick. It documents, with wit, but also sobering candor, a phenomenon in which we are all caught, and historically speaking, is relatively new. Everything is, in fact, accelerating. It isn't your imagination. You are busier; busier than you used to be; a lot busier than anybody who lived before you. You are working more hours, sleeping a lot less and eating on the run. It has created a whole new vocabulary: "technostress, hurry-sickness, data smog, Internet addiction, telephone tag, voice mail hell, cyberphobia, e-mail spam," and of course, multitasking, which Gleick defines as "You don't do just one thing at a time any more. You multitask. In the car you drink coffee, listen to self-improvement tapes, talk on the cellular phone and floss." And on the Kennedy, squeeze off a few obscene gestures.

Gleick reports that Americans are buying shampoo that reduces hair drying time by 30%; punching 88 instead of 90 into the microwave because it takes less time to tap the same digit twice, politicians learn the art of the ten second sound byte, and I loved knowing this, because I've long suspected it—those "close door" buttons on elevators are often placebos with no function other than to make us feel that we've speeded up our trip; and the ultimate in fast food—a restaurant in Tokyo that charges by the minute and not the

amount consumed and where at lunch, people wait in long lines to get in. (See *New York Times Review of Books,* 9/12/99)

When Jesus asked, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" he was raising a profound issue. We're certainly giving it our best shot. We're doing our best to squeeze every minute of the time we have; to pack it all in, to do it all, and his suggestion was that at heart that's a symptom of a spiritual problem, a spiritual sickness, if you will.

"Do not worry about your life," he said, . . what you will eat, or drink or wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds, the lilies of the field . . .God knows what you need. Stop worrying."

I've often thought those are either among the most important, or the silliest words he ever said. If you watch the birds you know that if they're not worrying, they're spending every waking moment thinking about and working at food and shelter. Look at the birds. 80% of the robins die every year from thirst and hunger.

To be human is to worry. Mad Magazine's grinning cartoon character, Alfred E. Newman, with the caption, "What, me worry?" used to make us laugh because everybody knows one of the things human beings do best is worry. W. H. Auden coined the phrase, 'The Age of Anxiety,' a generation ago. Franz Kafka wrote novels about nameless, faceless fear, and Soren Kierkegaard wrote a century ago about the human condition as,"Fear and Trembling." Alone in creation, apparently, human beings worry. Alone in creation, apparently, human beings know about the limits of our own lives, our finiteness.

And so we worry—a lot—and we do what we can to resolve our worries, and secure our futures against whatever terrible things might happen. Y2K mania has become a growth industry because it plays directly into this phobia of ours, this incessant worrying about the future. And it's precisely at that point that Jesus catches us with an admonition that sounds at once profound and silly—"Don't worry. God will give you what you need."

In the meantime, anxiety determines a lot of what you and I do. Walter Brueggeman tells a story of friends who are parents of a four-year old. "Recently, the mother told him they had to make an important decision. She had to get her son into the right kindergarten because if she didn't, then he wouldn't get into the right prep school. And that would mean not getting into Davidson College. And if he didn't go to school there, he wouldn't be connected to the bankers in Charlotte and be able to get the kind of job where he would make a lot of money." ("The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity," *The Christian Century,* 3/24-3/31/99)

We are, in fact, expert worriers. Frederick Buechner says telling us not to worry is like telling a person with a head cold not to sneeze. (*Whistling in the Dark,* p.10) A new rash appears on our arm and we are sure it is skin cancer. When a loved one doesn't answer the telephone, we're sure something terrible has happened.

We do worry about our lives. We do spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to secure ourselves.

"Do not worry about what you will wear," Jesus said. Just last Sunday, the *Times Magazine* was devoted to the topic. "It' So You: What Clothes Reveal and Mask About Identity," was the title of the issue. Fashion, the writer contended, is about "collective yearning." What we decide to put on each day has to do with who we are or want to be.

Sometimes clothing even makes an explicit statement. T-shirts identify our loyalties to schools, businesses, colleges, rock bands, political parties. I have an assortment of baseball caps, T-shirts and sweat shirts, each one of which makes a statement about the wearer. My favorite is a sweat shirt gift from a daughter who knows me well. It announces in bright red letters, "I'm not opinionated. I'm just always right." When I wear it people smile, and nod knowingly.

So we worry a lot: about our lives, about what we look like, about our security, about our loved ones. And insofar as we worry, we are inclined to give our anxieties the power to shape and form the way we live. And that's called idolatry . . . giving someone or something other than God the power and authority to shape and form our lives.

We can't let go of our goods, because they secure our future. We can't let go of our obsession with speed and living in the fast lane, because it is our way of expressing anxiety about the limits of our own lives. And this particular idolatry can be harmful to our relationships and our spiritual, mental and physical health.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who you hear quoted from this pulpit regularly, is an Episcopal priest and professor of preaching, and is very much in demand as a speaker and lecturer. She writes regularly for a magazine I'm involved with and in a recent column, announced that on the occasion of her 50th birthday, she is declaring a Jubilee and accepting no more outside responsibilities. She will continue to love her neighbors, she says, she just isn't going to canvass the country looking for more. She vows to pay attention to what she most loves. And in an extraordinary paragraph explains:

> "I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time when we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God, who is as busy as we are, will surely understand." (*The Christian Century,* 11/3/99)

"Do not worry about your life," Jesus said. He was speaking to his disciples and to us, and he was teaching a fundamental lesson about life; that is—that nothing ultimately can save us but God's love: nothing—not our busy schedules, good deeds, full bank account, will secure and protect us, and ultimately give us peace and a sense of wholeness. The only thing that can do that for us is the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, without reservation, with a love that is more powerful, more real, than anything in the world; a love that bears all things believes all things, hopes all things, a love that stands when all else has fallen. He was inviting them to trust that love—to trust him. He was offering them an opportunity to live life fully—without anxiety, to experience each day, not for

what it can add or produce, but as God's wondrous gift. God will give you all you truly need, he promised.

Bob and Dalia Baker are Fourth Church members who decided, earlier this year, to volunteer for mission work for the Presbyterian Church(USA) in the embattled region of Kosovo. Bob is an attorney, Dalia a school teacher. They are in Tirana, Albania, where Bob coordinates refugee resettlement and relief services for churches and non-governmental agencies. Dalia teaches in a school for the children of the Western mission workers who have been assembled in the region.

Recently Dalia wrote to Dana Ferguson about a family with three children who could not afford the tuition in the school. The parents were trying to home-school their children and keep up with their work. It wasn't working. Dalia didn't exactly ask for the money, but she did let Dana know what was needed and, of course, we found the money and sent it to Albania.

This week we heard from Dalia:

> "Dear Dana,
>
> It is difficult to explain the joy that we all experienced here when I told the principal that the children from San Salvador will be able to come to the mission school because our church, Fourth Presbyterian of Chicago, has provided the year's tuition payment for the children. Mr. Thompson called the parents right away to tell them the good news. The following day, both parents arrived at school with their three children, Herbert, William and Karen (their American names). The parents were in tears. They were so overwhelmed by the generosity given to them and their children. There were hugs, and thanks and more hugs. The children were thrilled to be in school. Herbert is in my class, the 6th-7th grade class, and is doing very well. He is an eager student and already has passed three chapter tests in the math book as I try to evaluate on what level he will start in the math program. William is in the 4th-5th grade class and Karen is in the first grade. The children are polite, kind, and already I was told by one of my other 7th graders that the "new kids" are great soccer players. They needed a great goalie.
>
> Please tell everyone that their generosity is making a real difference in the lives of the three children. The children now have friends, teachers, and a school community that they belong to. Please tell whoever made this dream of an education possible, that they are remembered in prayers every day. Everyday the children in school pray: ' . . .God, send extra love to our helpers in the Chicago church.'
>
> Every member of Fourth Church should know that the generosity extended across the ocean to this, the poorest of the European nations, is not only appreciated, but valued. You are actually changing the course and future of many lives. As Thanksgiving approaches, everyone in Fourth Church should stand proud knowing that there are many of us here thanking God for all of you."
> Dalia Baker

Sometimes it takes an extreme situation to teach us that. Sometimes we have to have everything taken from us in order to understand what we truly need.

No one ever understood that more profoundly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would lose everything as a prisoner of the Nazis, for his opposition to Hitler, and would ultimately be executed. He wrote, "The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves. This is not a moral law, a rule to be followed . . it is the gospel of Christ." (*The Cost of Discipleship,* p.159-161)

It is finally a matter of determining who and what is in charge of your life. If it is your fear, your worry, your anxiety, you are not fully alive. If it is God, you are gloriously free to enjoy what you are given, to live passionately and deeply in the safety of God's love.

It is not a promise of good health and prosperity. Bonhoeffer knew what lay ahead as the Nazi's tightened their hold on the life of his nation, the universities, the courts, the church. Nevertheless, God would provide what he needed.

What Jesus was teaching then is perhaps the most important lesson anyone of us can ever learn: namely that life is more than our busy schedules, our professional accomplishments, our savings and investments: that there will come a time for every one of us when we will not be busy, hurried, driven—when we will not be able to accelerate, and when we will know what we truly need. In the meantime, Jesus warned, you can miss your own life—miss the glory and beauty and passion of it—if you don't simply accept it as a gift.

A friend of mine, Don McCullough, tells about a friend of his whose ten year old daughter died of leukemia. The father was devastated, distraught. But finally, after several years, he wrote, "It makes things bearable when I remember that Laurie Lee was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to thank God that I was given her in the first place. The way of gratitude does not alleviate the pain, but it somehow puts some light around the darkness and builds strength to move on." (*Say Please, Say Thank You,* p.20)

--a gift, neither earned nor deserved—at the end of a demanding day, in an arduous week full of stress, Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony and the passionately beautiful French Horn solo in the second movement—a gift.

- the touch of your beloved's hand
- a grandchild's squeal of delight
- the bright moon and sky full of stars.
- a bite of an apple, or good bread.
- the blessing of sleep at the end of the day; all gifts unearned, undeserved.

John Updike wrote, "Ancient religion and science agree. We are here to give praise. Or to slightly tip the equation, to pay attention . . ."
(*Odd Jobs,* p.869)

And Anne Lamott, in *Traveling Mercies:* "Here are the two best prayers I know: "Help me, help me, help me" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Lamott continues, "A woman I know says for her morning prayer, 'Whatever' and in the evening, 'Oh, well.' But the best are Help me and thank you.

Thanksgiving, it always seems to me, arrives at just the right time. Christmas is not only coming, it's here. The stores have been decorated for weeks. The lights came on last evening and we dutifully turned on our electric sheep. The buses full of shoppers are lined up on side streets, The Salvation Army band has reappeared, the tree is up across the street, the street musicians will make the annual repertoire transition this week from Misty to Winter Wonderland, and with the economy up and unemployment down, it will be a banner Christmas. We will think a lot about food and clothing, about our lives in the next month. And we'll live at a pace that will leave us exhausted by December 25. We will, as W.H. Auden predicted—try to do too much, eat and drink too much and love all our relatives. Fourth Presbyterian Church will be part of it—three services on Sunday morning during December and a fourth candlelight service on Christmas Eve, if we're still standing. And it begins this week on Thanksgiving—a time to take stock of all the gifts. There are no presents to buy and not many cards to send, or parties to attend: a quiet day for many of us, to enjoy the gifts of God, the people God has given us to love, our homes and communities, our nation, food and drink, God's gifts to meet our needs.

Do not worry about your life—what you will eat or drink or wear . . . strive first for the Kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well.

"Let all things now living
a song of Thanksgiving
To God our Creator
triumphantly raise,
Who fashioned and made us
Protected and stayed us
By guiding us on
to the end of our days.

Amen.